

Materialism is Masturbation : Essays In Freedom
by Joe Blow

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>
<u>Materialism is Masturbation</u>
<u>The Conscience of the Free Individual</u>
<u>The Malignancy of Idealism</u>
<u>Do We Know That We Are Life Itself?</u>
<u>You Complete Me</u>
<u>Fantasies and Sexual Healing</u>
<u>Taboos and Fixations</u>
<u>Untying the Sexual Knot</u>
<u>Anorexia, Armouring and Objectification</u>
<u>Fifty Shades of Sexual Liberation</u>
<u>Sucked Into Paradise</u>
<u>Inner Space – the Final Frontier</u>

Introduction

As with my first book – ***How to Be Free*** – I make no claims for the ideas expressed in these essays. I'm not an authority. I haven't studied psychology formally. My ideas are largely the product of introspection. So these essays should be viewed as experiments in free thought. Please take from them what you may find of value and reject the rest. Although each essay has been written to stand alone, ***How to Be Free***, which is available as a free download from Smashwords and anywhere else you may have found this book, may be the better introduction to these ideas.

About the Author

Joe Blow is the pseudonym for a man who, though currently happy and high functioning, has had a long history of mental illness, including endogenous depression, bipolar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. His writing is the product of a lifelong struggle to integrate flashes of insight and powerful symbols which appeared to him, often during what we might define as psychotic episodes, with observable reality and a rudimentary knowledge of science by appropriating useful concepts from the work of such iconoclastic thinkers as Wilhelm Reich, R. D. Laing, Keith Johnstone, William Blake and Oscar Wilde.

If asked whether this approach and this conceptual framework have provided him with a secure foundation for emotional stability, happiness and flowering creativity, Blow would reply, "Well, so far so good."

He also writes humorous erotica under the pseudonym Aussiescribbler.

Materialism is Masturbation

Materialism is masturbation. It is something which can make us feel better when we are on our own.

"Am I a worthwhile person?" we ask ourselves. "Well a worthless person wouldn't live in a big house and drive a fast sports car, would they?" we answer. But the fact that we are asking the question means that, in a very real sense, we are alone. We are trapped in an ego, the insecurity of which keeps us turned inwards, keeps us obsessed with physical evidence that we are loveable, while cutting us off from any possibility of really loving or being loved by anyone.

But this doesn't mean that materialism is a bad thing. The route to our liberation is through learning that we *are* worthy, and, if material goods give us that message then that is a good place to start. We shouldn't feel ashamed of our materialism any more than we should feel ashamed about masturbating. In fact, to the extent that materialism is an addiction, it is a sense of shame associated with it which is the driving force of that addiction.

Addiction occurs when we need more of something to achieve that same effect, when the appeal of something wears off. No matter how right wing our political beliefs may be it is very hard to escape an underlying sense of guilt that we have luxuries while others are starving. But this sense of guilt doesn't help anyone, because the more it undermines our sense of worth the more material luxuries we need to compensate. So we are less happy and more addicted, and the starving are still starving.

Now we could adopt the form of idealism known as voluntary simplicity in which conspicuous consumption is eschewed and greater material generosity shown to others, but if this is another way for the insecure ego to prove its worth then we are still not healing where we need to heal and we may be contributing to the sense of guilt of those still trying to enjoy their materialism. It may just be another form of selfishness if what matters to us is how we are perceived and the net effect on the social system around us does not concern us.

The road out of addiction, whether it be an addiction to materialism or an addiction to idealism, is to enjoy it more and thus need it less. If the purpose of our materialism or our idealism is to convince us that we are worthy, then let it carry that message unadulterated by the guilt that may accompany materialism or the sense of superiority that might accompany idealistic acts. Pleasure is healing, and the more we are healed the more available we become to be a healthy part of the wider social system, and thus the more others benefit. Of course pleasures can carry a price, and it is better to choose a pleasure which doesn't do us physical harm. Taking heroin may be pleasurable at first, but the price of physical addiction far outweighs any temporary psychological benefits arising from that experience.

Masturbation is a healthy activity, an easy risk-free source of pleasure, but it carries an association of loneliness and accepting a substitute for what we really desire. And this is why I make the connection between it and materialism. We find our meaning, and our deepest opportunities for pleasure, in our relationship to others. Even when someone like Henry David Thoreau departed from human society for a couple of years to live in the woods and find himself, he found himself in relation to the natural environment, and that experience only achieved its full significance when he wrote about it and communicated his ideas to others.

Just as meaning is conveyed by a letter of the alphabet only when it takes its place in the context of a word, our meaning derives from our relationship to the whole of which we are a part. This is not to say that we should submit ourselves to that whole in the way that forms of idealism such as communism or various forms of religion would have us do. To submit is not to be a part of something but to be crushed by that thing, to cease to be a healthy part. We can only be a healthy part of the whole by being fully and completely ourselves. If discipline is required then we are not there yet.

Self-interest is the motivation for all human behaviour. Even in the case where a person may lay down their life for another, that individual has a belief system which makes death preferable to a

life of knowledge that they were not true to that system. So we should not feel uncomfortable about making decisions based on what is in it for us. This is inevitable. If we think that we are placing someone else's welfare above our own then we are fooling ourselves. We may be following the dictates of our conscience, but it is *our* conscience and the suffering it might inflict on *us* which we are trying to avoid. The real question is how enlightened our self-interest is. Eating fatty food may give me a sense of comfort, but if I'm on the verge of a heart attack that comfort may be short-lived.

Jesus placed great significance, at the Last Supper, on the bread and wine which was being shared. Clearly what was important was the act of sharing. If we use the term God to describe the universal system of which we are all a part then anything which is healthy and is shared - such as bread or wine - is the flesh and blood of God. Any living system can only continue to live if the stuff of life continues to flow through it.

Of course it is possible to share something which is not good for the system. Lies, gossip, addictive drugs, disease - all of these things can be shared from one person to another and poison the social system. So, when seeking to find our meaning through sharing, it *does* matter what we are sharing.

Information is one of the things we share. The collective enterprises in which we engage, from playing a board game to running a multi-billion dollar corporation require the sharing of information. Factual information is the blood of the system, while lies are poison and wisdom is medicine. What spreads through the communication networks of the social system, such as the internet, effects the health of that system.

And pleasure is a key to healing. Where pleasure is shared significant healing is taking place in the fabric of the social system. If we want to be a part of a healthy system then our best chance is to find activities which help others while also giving us pleasure.

If materialism is masturbation, then sharing is an orgy!

The Conscience of the Free Individual

Our deepest nature is to be unconditionally loving. This is why, as a baby, we bonded with our parents so easily. A baby is completely trusting and the demands it makes are only the demands made by any living thing which cannot yet meet its own needs – food, warmth, tender physical contact.

As we get older we develop our ego – our conscious thinking self – which incorporates our self-image. If our experiences have not left us feeling insecure, then our ego is an efficient structure of self-image and a conceptual framework for thinking about other people and the world in general which allows our unconditionally loving nature to continue to be expressed freely.

But more often we have been hurt by bad experiences before we could develop such an ego-structure and thus we build defences in the form of rigid dogmatic ways of thinking about ourselves and the world. We may create these defences or adopt those which are offered to us by those around us. These defences are there to stop us from getting hurt further – to restrain any destructive impulses we may feel inside ourselves and to defend us against criticism from others. The downside is that these are not truly effective defences. They divide us against ourselves and they act as a filter for our capacity to love others, so that we are only able to attain a loving relationship with a very limited group of people and may, in some cases, even feel hatred toward some other individuals or groups.

No defence can heal the damage which has been done to the ego. The one thing which can heal the damage is self-acceptance – the realisation that whatever we have done or has been done to us is in the past and cannot be changed and thus should be accepted and that our thoughts and feelings (unlike our actions) cannot harm anyone and thus should also be accepted unconditionally (no matter how wrong they may seem) as a part of the creative process which, when we let go of the fear-driven impulse to try to control it, will lead us back to wholeness.

A part of the ego is our conscience. The conscience is the codification of our expectations about ourselves (at least to the extent that that expectation is one towards behaviour which we personally identify as good behaviour).

In general the conscience contains principles which we learn from those around us – our parents, our teachers, our peers. The original source of these principles may be a religion or some other social philosophy. But each person's conscience is individual to them depending on their own personal priorities. Someone who thinks it is very important to look after their physical appearance may have a conscience which tells them not to have that extra slice of cake. Someone who has been taught that it is wrong to make love to a member of their own sex may have a conscience which tells them that they should struggle against such desires if they occur. Someone who believes that it is important to always be strong may feel that it is wrong to admit defeat.

There are some exceptional individuals who either have an extreme form of conscience which is in stark contrast to the principles common in their social environment or appear to have no conscience at all.

Some of the individuals historically characterised as saints, for instance, may fall into the first category. Where their particular form of conscience cannot be explained by their environment it may be a result of what we would now term compulsive obsessive disorder if it takes a negative form such as individuals who feel drawn towards extremes of self-abasement or self-flagellation (as some saints did). But where it takes a positive form of compelling the individual towards exceptional acts of generosity it may be due to the incorporation of principles which have their origin in contact with the individual's deeper loving orientation, through such means as meditation, fasting, psychotic breakdown or, in some tribal cultures, the ingesting of psychotropic substances.

Those who appear to have no conscience at all we refer to as psychopaths or sociopaths. These are individuals who appear to be incapable of feeling remorse when their actions seriously harm others. Of course in some cases such an individual might simply be very good at hiding, denying or repressing feelings of remorse. And though everyone has some expectations about

themselves and how they should behave, for some these expectations have no moral component. For instance a Viking warrior might have had an expectation that he would fight ruthlessly and show no compassion to those whose villages he was pillaging. Whether we can call this a conscience is debatable. And there are others who feel no remorse because they feel that their behaviour is morally justifiable according to the principles of their conscience even when it is destructive – for instance the puritans who appear to have felt no remorse for torturing to death women they believed were witches, because their conscience told them that it was a part of their duty to their God.

So does the free individual who has achieved wholeness through self-acceptance have a conscience? My answer would be – "Yes." The difference is that free individuals will base their expectations of themselves on their own reasoning rather than on submission to the received wisdom of others. They will examine any moral principle presented to them seriously, but will only adopt it if they have a rational understanding of why a particular course of action is destructive to their own wholeness and creativity and/or the potential for wholeness and creativity in others and in society generally or why another kind of action is constructive and should not be avoided.

My own conscience tells me that I should be honest, non-judgemental and generous. Wholeness can only exist on a foundation of truth. While it is necessary to subject the ideas and actions of others to critical assessment, to judge the individual on the basis of their actions or ideas is a denial of the fact that we are – at base – a part of the same whole. The idea or action may be wrong. The individual who holds that belief or commits that action never is. And giving freely of oneself is the life blood of the whole. If we hold back we separate ourselves from those who, on the deepest level of our being, are our own loved ones.

So these principles make rational sense if we see wholeness and creativity – personal and social – as the meaning of existence.

But there is one principle of the conscience of the free individual which is more important than any other – and that is self-acceptance.

I may believe that it is right to be honest, non-judgemental and generous, but I do not always find myself following those principles. I lie. I judge. I am greedy. This is why self-acceptance is so important, because it is the application to ourselves of that which we believe we should show to others. Honesty – I admit that I am not perfect. Non-judgement – I don't judge myself for falling short of my principles. Generosity – I show kindness and tolerance and patience towards myself.

Wholeness cannot be achieved by the efforts of the individual. We cannot become what we would like to be through an act of will. And this is why patience and tolerance towards ourselves and others is so important. Because wholeness and creativity are our deepest nature, they grow into expression naturally as insight removes the impediment of ignorance and delusion.

Imagine society as a garden. It is no good losing our patience because the flowers are not growing and trying to make them bigger by tugging on them. But if we spray the strangling weeds of ignorance and dogmatic delusion with the herbicide of clear rational insight, sprinkle the soil with the fertiliser of wisdom and patiently apply the water of our loving attention, the garden will fill with flowers more beautiful than anything of which our imagination could conceive.

The Malignancy of Idealism

Our basic nature is to be unconditionally loving. As very young children we did not place conditions on our acceptance of others. We accepted them as they were regardless. Animals also love in this way, but when they become adults this nature is sometimes hidden beneath the need to compete for food and breeding opportunities. Adult dogs and cats in the wild can seem to be "red in tooth and claw", at least to those of us who might end up on the menu, but our domestic dogs and cats, having grown accustomed over generations to having their needs met by humans, are praised for their unconditionally loving natures.

Sometimes we humans have to compete over food or other necessities too. But the main source of human conflict is our thinking and specifically our attachment to ideals.

Idealism is like a dangerous conceptual virus, because it eats away at our capacity for unconditional love. It places conditions on our love of ourselves and of others by introducing the expectation of a certain kind of behaviour and eventually leading us to demand it. It is a particularly pernicious virus because we believe that we need it and that it is something which leads to improvement in ourselves and society. It doesn't. In fact it is the source of our capacity for evil.

It is only after we have been hurt by life in some way, and thus become insecure or neurotic, that we feel the need to cling to ideals of any kind. And usually we *have* been so wounded by the time our parents, our teachers or our religious leaders start feeding them to us.

Some believe that Jesus (on whose philosophy a very destructive religion was founded) was himself an idealist. I think this is a mistake, just like that religion. If one looks carefully at the description of his words and actions which we have and replace the word "sin" with "selfishness" and "God" with "love", etc., it becomes clearly that, unlike many who claimed later to represent him, he was not trying to insist on, or scare people into following, a moral code. He was simply describing our psychological state, offering comforting statements about it and providing advice on resolving conflict and promoting the healing of ourselves and our society.

Most, if not all, of the destruction wrought by humans comes from one of these things :

1. People trying to force themselves or others to conform to some ideal.
2. People retaliating against the oppressiveness of some ideal.
3. The selfishness which is just the natural self-directedness of those wounded by 1. or 2.

There is no objective standard for what is ideal behaviour. Healthy or loving behaviour is determined by consideration of the whole situation, but ideals exist in isolation.

Idealism and holism are incompatible. Idealism is the separation of that which is considered ideal from that which is considered non-ideal. A whole is something which is not separated. And anything partial incites its opposite. There would be no Right Wing if there were no Left Wing. There would be no interest in Satanism if there were no Christianity. One group insists, the other defies and so society or the individual is torn apart.

To drive a stake through the heart of that vampire Idealism is to free ourselves from humanity's historic curse which had the power to turn us from beings characterised by loving playfulness into miserable and destructive ego maniacs.

Are We Aware That We Are Life Itself?

In seeking to understand ourselves there is a very useful analogy – that of water and its container. What is the essence of who we are? It is raw consciousness – the self-awareness of the life energy. Everywhere in nature this life energy expresses itself, thrusting forward to take advantage of all possibilities. Where there is fertile soil and water, life will take root and flourish, and the earth swarms with animals driven on by the life energy to feed and to mate. The life energy is an unquenchable tide that flows through us at all times. Our rational mind and our body provide the circumference of this energy. These things give it shape and give us the ability to function as a partially independent entity. We are only partially independent because we need the web of life around us to sustain us, but we can take independent action and exercise independent thought.

If we think of raw consciousness or life energy as water and our body and conscious mind or ego as the vessel which contains the water we can more easily understand the nature of anxiety and courage, and also more rationally assess the concept of life after death.

First, in looking at anxiety, let's imagine that the conscious mind or ego is a dam holding back the pressure of the water that is our life energy. We all need to use our conscious mind to establish a practical level of order in our lives. Universal consciousness can't tell us what groceries we need to buy at the shop or how to wash our underpants. We need a sense of ourselves as a separate entity and we need to be able to accumulate and store the information necessary to perform the tasks in our life. And we have to exercise self-discipline in our interactions with others. We can't simply do whatever the life energy which is our essence pushes us to do. And this tends to become more true the more we exercise that self-discipline. It is natural for life to push against the boundaries which frustrate and limit it and it is natural for it to seek pleasure and opportunities to create beyond itself, but there are times when, through our possession of a rational mind, we come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that to act directly on such impulses would be counter-productive. There are times when we have to accept frustration. And if we have no appropriate outlet for those feelings of frustration then we need to build up a psychological structure of containment. This is our armour. It is there to protect us against threats from without, but it is also there to contain that which is within and meet the threat that it poses.

The more water a dam has to hold back the stronger and more inflexible it has to be and the greater the danger if it were to collapse. And so it is with our armour – our ego-structure (which may also express itself physically through a stiffening of the musculature which aids the holding in of powerful emotions). While, for most of us, the armour is about holding things in, this is not always the case. Some do not exercise much self control. In the extreme case of a warlord who might spend his time raping and pillaging and slaughtering we can see that there isn't much holding back, but his behaviour is armoured behaviour. The aim of the armour in this case is to protect against open communication with others. It is only possible to mistreat people if we are closed off to loving communication with them. What would drive such a tyrant would still be the life force, which has no discriminatory powers. How the life force expresses itself in action is dependent on the thinking of the individual. Where we see behaviour which is self-destructive or destructive of others generally it is the life force operating in the service of a lie. The mind acts as a channel for the life force and the positive or negative nature of the resulting behaviour depends on the mind's capacity for truthfulness.

Sometimes we identify ourselves more with the dam and sometimes more with the water that it contains. When we feel anxiety we are identifying with the dam. Anxiety is a feeling which alerts us to the possibility that we might not be able to maintain that dam. We think that maybe the dam will break and we will lose control of ourselves. Or we think that some threat from outside will lead to the damaging or destruction of the dam. In the extreme it may be death itself which we fear, which is the final end of the dam. While the ultimate answer to anxiety may be to learn to identify more with the water than with the dam, anything which allows us to let more water out at the top of the dam decreases our susceptibility to anxiety. Any cathartic release of pent-up emotions eases the

pressure on the dam and makes us less prone to feelings of anxiety. We can be a dam that holds back the water or we can be a swimmer in a peaceful ocean.

Anxiety is like pain, it is a messenger that alerts us to threats. But it can, at times, exceed its useful function. On the other hand there are individuals who show remarkable courage in the face of over-whelming adversity. There are martyrs who have gone calmly to their deaths. And there are many examples of soldiers who completed their missions while facing almost certain death. These are only the most commonly considered kinds of courage. Courage takes many forms. But how can we explain such extraordinary courage? I believe that the source of courage is the realisation (on some intuitive level) that we are not merely alive. We are life itself. Life, unlike our individual ego, is eternal and unconquerable. When we are divided against ourselves, engaged in a war to hold back aspects of our own nature, then we are weakened and more prone to anxiety. But within us flows the unquenchable tide of existence. We talk of enthusiasm. The word means "the God within". When we are filled with enthusiasm for any activity we forget to be afraid because we are in the grip of something bigger and deeper than fear. Now this may be something destructive, as in the case of the warlord. I'm sure that it is not only those whose minds are characterised by wisdom who are, at least at times, capable of identifying more with the life force itself than with the armour. To learn to do so is not an alternative to learning to think truthfully, but the two skills can work well together.

So what of life after death? In contemplating this concept it is helpful to think not of a dam but of a glass full of water. Our body and our conscious mind are the glass and the life force of raw consciousness is the water which fills it. The water is the same water which fills all other humans and all other living things. What gives it its unique shape and identity is the glass. So what happens at death? The glass is broken. The water loses its unique identity, but it is, as it has always been, something eternal. So the concept of a personal after-life for the individual makes no sense, and yet we find our deepest meaning and capacity for courage in an acknowledgement that this life is a fleeting expression of something greater and eternal - a temporary twig that grows out of a tree that lives forever.

You Complete Me

A conversation with a fellow erotica author about the pros and cons of making one's fictional characters practise safe sex led me to some thoughts about the nature of the contradictory and the complimentary. The conclusion I came to was that, while neither of us was going to change the way we do things, we each need people who operate according to the other's principles and society generally needs both approaches. Fiction can be a forum through which to consciously construct healthy trends. But fiction is also a process of untrammelled self-discovery through which we learn important personal lessons. As a person whose life has been restricted by his overly-cautious temperament I need to forget entirely about questions of safety when creating a fantasy. My fiction is telling me : "Sometimes wonderful things happen when you lose your inhibitions and take risks." But the world also needs voices of caution who say : "You can minimise the risks and still have fun."

This is where the great potential for social change and healing comes from, the realisation that we need that which contradicts us to complete us. The central feature of our neurosis as individuals and as a society is a split. We have a choice about whether we will widen that split or be a part of healing it.

Let's take politics for instance. Political belief systems have to be positioned according to two axes. Often we think only of the left and the right, with the left emphasising a social responsibility to take care of the needs of all members of society in an egalitarian way and the right supporting the freedom of the individual to pursue personal success even if it be at the expense of others. But both a left wing and a right wing approach to managing society can be followed in either an authoritarian or non-authoritarian way. Advocates of state socialism call for higher taxes and the institution of more laws to protect the rights of workers and the unemployed, while anti-authoritarian anarchists call for less governmental control and trust that abandoning support for power hierarchies and the concentration of wealth they enable will make society more egalitarian naturally and unleash our capacity for mutual aid as an alternative to dependence on government controlled welfare. The authoritarian right wing support "law and order" policies and using tax money to fund a large military which can use violence or the threat of violence to stifle opposition at home or abroad. The libertarian right wing have an "every man for himself" policy epitomised by the survivalist with his home-grown food and his gun.

Sanity in politics, as in every other aspect of life, lies in the middle. As long as our society remains a neurotic one, we need some authoritarianism but not too much and we need to be egalitarian but not oppressively so. To abandoned state authority would mean an end to the police and the legal process. We could commit any crime we wanted but we would also have to rely on ourselves entirely for self-protection. But we don't want the government interfering in our personal freedom in areas where our actions don't do serious harm to others. We need to be left-wing enough to provide a welfare system so that people don't have to die on the street like stray dogs. Workers need to be paid a decent wage for the amount of work they do and compensated for the risks they take if their occupation is a dangerous one. But we don't want a society which takes away the incentives which ambition and greed provide for innovation and efficiency. When our neurosis is healed this will not be necessary as innovation and efficiency will be driven by our love of creativity and efficiency for their own sake. But we are not there yet.

When we fight against something two things happen. That thing becomes stronger or more determined and we become more like it. This is the nature of polarisation. In politics the extreme left wing is a mirror image of the extreme right wing and vice versa. And each makes the other unavoidable. If we really want to challenge the power of the extreme right wing or the extreme left wing in politics the way to do it is to take up a solid rational position in the centre and to try to lure those who are more moderately left or right wing to join us. This, in time, will undermine support for the extremes and lead to healing and sanity, a place where we can admit that we each have a bias and, because of that, need those with an opposing, or rather complimentary, bias to complete us.

One of the most powerful liberating and healing aspects of learning the art of self-acceptance is learning to accept the fact that we are inconsistent. We may want integrity. We may want to be whole. But we can't achieve this by trying to force ourselves to be self-consistent. Integrity and wholeness grow organically out of an acceptance of the contradictory aspects of our psyche. We can't force the jigsaw puzzle pieces to fit before we know what the picture is. I hate the idea of people being discriminated against on the basis of their skin colour or their sexuality. But I often love racist and homophobic jokes. I love women. But I also love watching sleazy exploitation films in which women are caged, raped or killed in gruesome ways. I love animals. But I also eat animals. Whatever we think of as our nature the opposite also exists within us. We can be at peace with it or we can fight it through the process of repression and projection. But our capacity for love and creativity will suffer through that battle. It is the battle with the darkness which enchains the light. What we have a choice about is how we will express what we have inside us. Watching movies and sharing jokes in private does no harm. The Marquis De Sade wrote *The 120 Days of Sodom*, a book which wallows in depictions of forms of cruelty and depravity which are likely never to be surpassed in their vileness, but he was not a particularly cruel man in real life. Similarly Japanese films and comic books have long been filled with graphic depictions of the torture and rape of women, and yet, apparently, Japan has a lower than average incidence of rape. Racism and misogyny predate the beginnings of civilisation. Clearly their roots go deep into our psyche. They are liable to come out in one way or another, and cultural expression is the safe arena for the collective expulsion of our poisons. This is where political correctness, the attempt to force equality by controlling language and social expression, is so unhelpful. It tries to hide the illness under the pretence of curing it. It is the equivalent of putting a clean bandage over a gangrenous wound.

But what about animals? Do they benefit from the fact that people like me eat them? In many instances I would say : "Yes." The lives of animals on a factory farm may be pretty appalling, but this is not the only way to raise livestock, and many cows and sheep and chickens seem to have a fairly contented life up until the time they are slaughtered in a manner which, though it might be improved upon, very often entails less suffering than accompanies the death of an animal in the wild. We might say : "Why should an animal die just to please our taste buds?" But it is the fact that we eat them that allows farm animals a chance to live in the first place.

Now I'm not saying this as an argument for meat-eating. There are many good arguments based on health, sustainability and compassion, for eating little or no meat. But the issue of meat-eating is a good example of where a perfectionist either-or mentality can be counter-productive. Some of us may go the whole hog, if you'll pardon the expression, and become vegans. This is fine as long as it is not a guilt-driven form of OCD which makes us miserable. If someone feels genuinely at peace with a way of life then it is probably what is right for them.

But for those of us who love to eat meat there can be a tendency to think that we have a choice between going on eating large quantities of meat as we are or giving it up altogether and becoming a vegetarian. We feel that maybe, one day, guilt will drive us to join what we may see as the growing cult of the vegetarians. We feel guilty about our cholesterol. We feel guilty because someone has just written a book comparing factory farms to Nazi death camps. We feel guilty about the Amazon rainforests being cleared in the name of hamburger production. But as long as we can we refuse to allow our very soul to be crushed. Because every time we allow our behaviour to be determined by feelings of guilt we die inside. If we do something out of love, we come alive, and for some the decision to embrace vegetarianism may have had nothing to do with guilt, but have arisen out of a love for their own body and for animals. They may have never liked meat to begin with. But it is not so for those of us who like to eat meat.

So where is this leading? Just as the biggest positive change in politics would come from a shift to the middle, so the biggest reduction in meat consumption would come from the cultivation of an attitude, among those of us who eat meat, that meat is a tasty treat to be enjoyed in moderation rather than as a staple of our diet. If you are a vegetarian you might cook a delicious vegetarian meal for a meat eater to show him that a meal does not have to be meat-based to taste good. He will probably be appreciative of this. But tell him about the appalling conditions on factory farms and he

will probably rush out and eat two more hamburgers to wash the taste of your self-righteousness out of his mouth.

If we think of ourselves as good guys fighting bad guys then this is just character armour, a construct to keep at bay the realisation that the darkness we see reflected in the behaviour of others exists also within the depths of our own psyche. We see in the divided world a reflection of our own divided selves. If we see only in terms of black and white and not in shades of grey (or even better colours) and we decide to hop on one end of the seesaw or the other rather than say to our opposite number – "You complete me" - then how can we hope to find wholeness within ourselves?

Fantasies and Sexual Healing

Our erotic desires are a pull towards healing. While bodily pleasures are appealing in their own right, our specific emotional needs determine the focus of our sexuality. While intercourse with the opposite sex may be the most natural way to procreate, most of our sexual behaviour is not about breeding. A desire for a healing of the psychological tear between the masculine and the feminine underlies heterosexual behaviour. Exclusively homosexual behaviour in males might be driven by a desire for a healing between the individual and the patriarchal society. Lesbians seek healing away from the more troubled masculine psyche and in bisexuality we may see a less neurotic, less fixated, form of sexuality in which the sharing of sexual pleasure is not restricted by the gender of the participants.

Often we also have sexual fixations around particular situations or kinds of activity. The erotic is kind of like an ambulance crew which goes straight to the spot where we are most wounded.

I'll first use myself as an example. During my early adolescence I developed a strong sense of shame about masturbating. This can't be attributed to any messages I picked up from my parents, but may have been a response to the way that other boys joked about the act as if anyone who did it was pathetic. The point is that I went for about six months without masturbating and felt that a black cloud of shame was hanging over my head. Eventually I talked about this with my parents and they reassured me that masturbation was perfectly natural and that I had done it when I was a baby. So I went back to masturbating, but in later years I still felt uncomfortable about how women would view me if they knew how much I did it.

Later, as I began to explore my sexual fantasies and eventually began to write erotica, I found that one of the things which gave me intense pleasure was the idea of a woman watching me masturbate. Here we have an example of the erotic as a process of healing. What was most erotic was a sexual transaction which reassured my deep-seated fear of rejection.

I recently read an account by a woman, who had been raped and who writes erotica, of how writing a rape-based story helped her to take back ownership of her own sexuality. And another woman who suffered a similar trauma has told me of how rape-play with a sexual partner is extremely erotic for her as long as she feels safe.

This fits with the idea that erotic desires and erotic fantasy represent a process of healing of our deepest wounds.

But does our society facilitate or hinder such healing?

Trauma lies not so much in the things which happen to us as in the way we think about those things. Many individuals go through very scary or painful experiences and then more or less forget about them as soon as they are over. Giving birth tends to be very painful and I'm sure it can be a frightening experience when it occurs, but once the mother has a healthy baby in her arms it seems to be quickly forgotten. What makes for trauma is on-going questions like : "Was it my fault?", "What will people think?", etc.

What is needed to heal trauma is self-acceptance – the realisation that what happened can't be changed, that whatever one feels is always all right and a trust that the mind knows the way towards healing. Erotic fantasy need not be a part of that, but for some of us it is, and this needs acceptance.

Prevalent social beliefs can work against this process. In the case of rape or child molestation an emphasis on the need to condemn the act and the perpetrator can lead to a feeling that the survivor of the abuse should remain in the role of victim. The act of finding healing and renewed confidence through fantasies which eroticise the experience may be viewed as a retroactive condoning of it. But really this has nothing to do with the fact that the abuse was wrong and can be criminally prosecuted.

When it comes to trauma resulting from sexual abuse part of the suffering is bound to come from the sense of shame which accrues even to the victim in a society which still carries a deep-seated fear of sexuality. We often think differently about someone who has been raped than we do someone who has been stabbed, and yet both are violent acts in which the body is invaded.

It might seem strange to say that our society has a deep-seated fear of sexuality when we look at what shows on television and the easy access to porn on the internet. But sex is not treated simply as the pleasurable physical act which it is. In polite society you can say you just drank a really nice cup of tea, but try saying you had a very satisfying masturbation session last night. Why should the two be any different? Only because we live in a society founded on the repression of sexuality and which, thus, rightly fears the power of sexuality to disrupt that society. In and of itself an act of sexual intercourse is like dancing, a pleasurable physical activity involving intimacy between two or more individuals. But you can dance in public and you can't have sex in public. And in the media, nudity and even loving sexual behaviour are treated as if they were more offensive to our deeper selves than violence is. They aren't. Loving sexual interactions, heterosexual or homosexual, are perfectly in harmony with our deepest nature which is to be unconditionally loving. Violence runs against that nature, but its depiction in the media plays an important cathartic role in our neurotic society. The reason why nudity and sex, when not aggressive or abusive, are treated as something dangerous is because these things are dangerous to our neurotic selves. They are not dangerous to non-neurotic adults or to children who have not yet become neurotic. But it is those who are particularly neurotic who impose the fear-driven rules of society.

It is important to be understanding about this fear of sex. Someone who is homophobic has no more choice about the fact than a arachnophobe has about being scared of spiders. In both cases they can learn to be free of fear, but it requires sensitivity on the part of those who are trying to help them.

And, of course, sex can have a dark face when combined with neurotic armouring. There is nothing wrong with enjoying fantasies about raping people, but to do the thing itself is evil. And some adults use their position of authority over children to satisfy themselves sexually. This is only the most socially-unacceptable form of abuse of adult authority over children. Being indoctrinated into a religion, being forced to perform in child beauty pageants, being told they are expected to go into the family business - any of these things, and many more, can have as big a detrimental effect on a child's life as an adult as sexual abuse. In general, to teach a child to obey authority because it is authority ("You'll do it because I say so.") is to lay down the conditioning which can make the child a future victim of other authority figures, be they dictatorial politicians or sexual predators. Once again, it is our society's fear of sex which leads us to concentrate our outrage on the sexual abuse of children and ignore or even condone other forms of abuse.

If our sexual fantasies are leading us toward healing, then what is the meaning of the current popularity of fantasies revolving around bondage, discipline and sado-masochism? These fetishes are nothing new, but the bestselling novel *50 Shades of Grey* by E. L. James (which I haven't read) is taking the world by storm, indicating that these kinds of fantasies are now a part of the mainstream.

One way of looking at the erotic appeal of bondage and discipline is that, if someone is fearful of their own erotic desires, the sense of safety that comes with being in bondage or submitting to another's discipline, allows them to explore those desires without danger of a scary loss of control.

But maybe there is another interpretation which can be put on this kind of fantasy. If the erotic offers a path out of shame or trauma, through returning to the source of shame or trauma and eroticising it, then perhaps we eroticise bondage and slavery as a path to freedom from the bondage and slavery of our neurosis.

Taboos and Fixations

We are sensual beings capable of many forms of bodily pleasure. The giving and receiving of such pleasure is one of the ways in which we can express love. There is no need for our desire or capacity for giving and receiving of such pleasure and affection to be specifically limited to interactions with the opposite sex. If our earliest proto-human ancestors lived in a similar way to our closest living relatives, the bonobos, which seems fairly likely, then their erotic exchanges were not limited according to gender, age or, in most cases, kinship. These erotic exchanges, or genital-genital rubbings, amongst bonobos are not related to mating. Similarly in our own individual history, we began life, according to Sigmund Freud, with an unbounded capacity for sensual enjoyment in all parts of our body and a tendency to desire sensual contact with others regardless of gender. He referred to this as polymorphous perversity. This is actually not a very good term, as perversity is defined as a deliberate deviation from that which is good. It was actually *from* this state that we deviated, but Freud began with adult behaviour which was viewed as deviant and tried to explain it as a regression to one aspect of our original state. When we reach puberty we develop a bias towards the genitals in our search for pleasure. Before this happens we are liable to also start developing a bias towards sensual, and later sexual, contact with one gender or the other.

Since erotic contact is an expression of love we come to principally seek it from those with whom we feel the greatest need to bond. Since our historic neurosis has left us with a split psyche in which one part of our nature is lived out and the other repressed, we are most likely to feel an erotic attraction to members of the opposite sex, since it is usually, but not always, the masculine which is repressed in the female and the feminine which is repressed in the male. Judging by the behaviour of the bonobos, this was not the case prior to our neurosis. At that point we were most likely unrestrainedly bisexual. It should also be explained that, in the neurotic state, the sexual behaviour of males can tend to become an expression of aggressive feelings toward the feminine. Sex between men and women is not always a case of affectionately sharing a capacity for bodily pleasure. A desire for conquest or domination can also sometimes be expressed in the sexual behaviour of men or women, but as long as this is consensual it can be part of the therapeutic nature of the erotic. It can be viewed as a cathartic form of psychodrama.

This explains why most of us have a principally heterosexual orientation and it explains why bisexual behaviour would be reasonably common, especially among those who are least repressed. But what of exclusive homosexuality? Here we don't have a case of opposites attracting in the hopes of forming a whole.

This is where it is important to examine the nature of taboos. A neurotic society brings with it the establishment of taboos, some for practical reasons and some having their basis in neurotic insecurity. An incest taboo serves the useful function of impeding inbreeding. But many sexual taboos originate in the neurotic's fear of the anarchic potential of unchannelled erotic desires. Such is the case with the taboos which grew up around same-sex erotic exchanges. These most likely began when the neurosis of males reached such a level that we were compelled to institute the oppression of women and the establishment of a patriarchal society. There have been some patriarchal societies, such as ancient Greece, where there was no taboo against homosexuality, but in many it has been particularly strong. Since our basic nature is to be bisexual, the neurotic heterosexual adult male is prone to fear of his repressed homosexual side and to feeling hostility towards those who express this potential. This can also be the case for the neurotic female, though the problem is generally less severe. Men are less likely to be troubled by homosexual behaviour amongst women, but may feel that it is a threat to their control over them. Women whose neurosis has led them to look to patriarchal males for a sense of security may feel the urge to mock homosexual men.

Taboos tend to contribute to the formation of fixations. A fixation is a response to an inability to accept something about ourselves. More often than not this is a learned response. We perceive that someone else doesn't accept something about us, and so our attention focusses on that thing in the same way that our tongue keeps going back to a sore tooth. A simple way of understanding this

is to look at the situation of a young boy who is caught by his parents experimenting by dressing himself in his sister's dress. If they are shocked and punish him, then he may feel that they don't accept that part of him which led him to try out female attire. If this becomes a fixation he may, in adult life, be a transvestite, someone who gets a special satisfaction in dressing up in female clothes and spending time with those who accept this behaviour. This isn't the only thing which can lead to transvestism. Some boys are dressed up by one of their parents in girl's clothes against their wishes and end up becoming transvestites. The only thing which is needed for a fixation to form is for there to be a sense of not being accepted for what we are. The behaviour arising from the fixation can take the form of defiance of the lack of acceptance or an obsessive need to seek acceptance through submission. The boy caught in a dress is following the first path and the one forced to wear a dress is following the second.

Given that our state during childhood was one in which sensual enjoyment and attraction was unbounded, any kind of sexual or sensual desire is liable to pop into our mind. If we accept it, then our mind will just flow on to something else unless it seems to be a desire which is practical to act upon. But if we don't accept such a desire, either because we have been taught that it is taboo, or because we tried it once and were punished, then we may become fixated on it.

Fixations can take two forms. We may develop an obsessive fear that we will act on the desire. This is a common form of obsessive compulsive disorder and may lead us to avoid situations in which this would be possible. On the other hand we may feel compelled to act on the desire as an expression of defiance of those who have told us that it is a part of us that is unacceptable. So a fixation can be either passive or active. And if it is active, it can take a dominant or submissive form. The transvestite who wears a dress in defiance of his parent's lack of acceptance is being dominant, while the transvestite who wears a dress in an attempt to retrospectively earn the acceptance of a parent is being submissive.

The behaviour of an infant is clearly not sexual behaviour, but this is an age when we often are taught that aspects of our behaviour are unacceptable. We might eat our own shit, we might piss on somebody, we might fiddle with the genitals of the family pet... If the lesson leaves us feeling strongly rejected rather than simply corrected, then we may develop a fixation. When we reach adulthood and become fully sexual beings the fixation can become an erotic one. Thus some adults have a sexual desire to eat their lover's faeces, to urinate on each other or to have sex with animals. There are also various things which give us comfort when we are infants. If we feel generally unaccepted we may fixate on something which we associate with a time when we were accepted. The second transvestite is an example of this. Other such elements of infancy which can be fixated upon and eroticised during adulthood include : shoes (since our mother's shoes accompanied us when we crawled around on the floor), breast-feeding, diapering, spanking, and being tightly held (which in adulthood can take the form of a fondness for bondage).

To get back to exclusive homosexuality. In a society which has a taboo against same sex erotic activities, a fixation on such activities is bound to occur very commonly. This is not to belittle exclusive homosexual relationships. Sex is therapy and the sharing of sexual pleasure and the healing that comes from it is love in practice. The only disadvantage of having a sexual fixation is if it leads us to engage in destructive or self-destructive behaviour or if the practicalities of satisfying it undermine the potential for a healing relationship with one's sexual partner. While, as Woody Allen pointed out, bisexuality doubles one's chances of a date on a Saturday night, homosexuality, of all the potential fixations other than exclusive heterosexuality, holds the greatest potential for a healthy loving relationship.

If this thesis is correct then the irony is that homophobia gave birth to homosexuality rather than the other way around.

But this theory about the relationship between taboos and fixations holds serious implications for one of our most serious social problems, that of child sexual abuse.

Sexual attraction of an adult to an infant (nepiophilia), a pre-pubescent child (pedophilia) or a pubescent child (hebephilia) and the acts which sometimes arise from such attractions is perhaps the most severe taboo of our society. A fixation on such feelings can have disastrous results. And

anything which causes harm to children naturally is a source of strong condemnation. But if a lack of acceptance of a thought or a desire is the cause for it becoming a fixation, then here we have a very dangerous potential for a negative feedback loop in which the horror with which society views this phenomena makes it more likely that we will develop a fixation on any thought or desire of this kind which our mind throws up. And this seems to be happening. Every day we hear of another child porn ring being cracked and large numbers of respected individuals being exposed as child molesters. We also have seen a change in how these issues are viewed. When Stanley Kubrick made his film of *Lolita* in 1962 it was considered controversial but it was generally accepted and a popular success. When Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* came out in 1997 it had trouble finding a distributor and was held up from release in Australia for 2 years due to claims that it was pro-pedophile propaganda. Similarly, while nude photos of children or adolescent girls were common on the covers of record albums, etc. in the 1970s, in Australia in 2008 an installation of decidedly non-sexual nude photos of adolescent girls by Bill Henson led to a hysterical response from many community figures including then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who referred to them as "absolutely revolting". We have gone from a time when the issue of pedophilia could be artistically examined to a time when the unclothed beauty of young bodies can no longer be celebrated for fear that this might turn us into child molesters. This social phenomenon is often referred to as "moral panic".

If a fixation of this kind is acted upon it can, once again, be in one of two possible forms. In the submissive form, the adult seduces the child. This is a plea for the child to accept those desires of which he himself is ashamed. The dominant form is rape, in which the man angrily attacks the object of the desire which has robbed him of the ability to accept himself.

So what is the answer? It seems to me that the negative feedback loop could be broken if we were to treat child sexual abuse the same way that we do murder. We have a no tolerance policy on murder. Murderers are jailed. But most of us are happy to admit that at some time we have felt like committing murder. We read books full of descriptions of murders and we watch movies in which murders are simulated in gruesome detail. Because we accept thoughts about murder and even the admission of sometimes having the desire to commit it, the incidence of individuals so fixated on the act that they have an addiction to committing it (i.e. serial killers) is thankfully relatively rare. The problem with our taboos about pedophilia isn't that we condemn the action, but that we also condemn the desire to commit the action. We don't allow ourselves the possibility of simply having the desire and realising that it would not be a good idea to act upon it. Like with so many evils, the fight against it is the driving force behind its very growth. Two things could reverse the trend. One is to understand the psychology of fixation, and the other is to stop teaching children to obey authority. A child who has been trained to do what their parents and teachers tell them, rather than to make decisions for themselves based on the information and suggestions provided by adults, is liable to also obey the authority of a child molester, especially if that individual *is* a teacher or their parent.

Untying the Sex Knot

How did something as natural and enjoyable as sex become something about which we may feel shame and even something we may use to express hostility to others?

To examine this question it seems best to consider my own experience.

My mother once told me that I used to masturbate when I was a baby. Of course I don't remember that, but this comment did perhaps make some sense of a fleeting thought I had when I first rediscovered masturbation at about the age of thirteen. "This feels like being a baby again," I thought, but I didn't know why.

But in the years before I rediscovered masturbation I had a strong interest and attraction to the opposite sex. I remember at the age of about ten enjoying seeing a scantily clad woman on television, and while taking a swimming lesson I felt an ecstatic feeling of excitement when I bumped into my busty young teacher and felt her soft breasts pressed against me.

I liked to play games with my sister and brother or my sister's school friends which involved taking our clothes off. And I enjoyed acting out fantasies about accidentally on-purpose revealing my body.

At some point I bought a cartoon magazine with risqué jokes and pictures of sexy women. My mother told me it was O.K. for me to look at something like this as long as I didn't hide the fact that I was. For me this would later be a dilemma as, when I got old enough to buy *Playboy*, I wanted to but didn't because I was too embarrassed to look at it openly.

When I rediscovered masturbation I enjoyed it immensely, but then for a while I began to feel a deep sense of shame about it. For about six months I didn't do it. Eventually I spoke to my parents and was reassured by them that masturbation was normal and healthy. Once I went back to masturbating I did it a lot. I would watch television at night masturbating the whole time, always hoping to see girls in bikinis or preferably naked.

My first two years of high school were spent at a Catholic school. My fellow pupils would often bring soft porn magazines to school and would delight in holding up the centrefolds for me to see. I think they hoped to embarrass me. I was embarrassed and so I didn't respond, but I loved it. I wished I had the courage to flaunt authority and look at porn magazines at school. But the teachers came down hard on this kind of thing. I remember one of them warning that we should be aware of how easy it is for someone to spread their addiction to this kind of material to others.

By year 11 I was in a different school, a secular one this time. Some of my friends would read sex novels and one day one of them was caught in English class writing an erotic story about a family who engage in incestuous orgies. He was told by his teacher that he should not only not write something like that, but that he shouldn't even think it.

I never developed any relationships with girls. I felt a strong attraction to them, but was too timid to act upon it.

As I moved into adulthood my sexuality was exclusively directed towards masturbating to sexy images and fantasies. And I continued to feel shame about how much time I spent on this activity which seemed to be a social taboo.

So where did the sense of shame come from? Not, presumably, from the home environment, as my parents were fairly relaxed and accepting about these things. But what I noticed in the school environment was that people had strong sexual desires like my own, but they were ashamed of them. The boys would joke about masturbation, but nobody would acknowledge that they did it. And the teachers often seemed frightened by the sexual, which could only be the case if their own desires were frighteningly strong.

It is helpful to put aside all our prejudices and look simply at what happens as our sexuality develops.

We are born unconditionally loving and uninhibitedly sensual beings. We are affectionate and like touching and being touched, and we bond closely with our family.

At puberty genital functioning is added to the mix. We start to have sexual feelings. Our

strongest initial sexual attraction is liable to be to members of our own family. We have no taboos. Taboos have to be learned. And we live intimately with our family.

Our parents, however, *do* have a taboo against incest. As our bodies develop, they may feel sexual attraction to us, but they recognise that this needs to be curtailed, and also that our expression of our innocent sexuality needs to be curtailed lest it lead to problems in a society characterised by sexual repression and armouring. The degree of sensitivity with which this curtailment of our original innocent sexuality is managed may determine the level of our own repression, our own armouring, during adulthood. It is important to remember that the young person's incestuous desires are an expression of love. Love is open spontaneous honest communication. If we feel sexual attraction towards someone then affectionately expressing those feelings is a part of love in practice. It is important that a curtailment of innocent sexuality is not interpreted by a young person as a rejection of their love.

When we are a child we take a lot of mistreatment from adults and we are very resilient to this, but what eventually wounds us so deeply is the rejection of our love by adults. All of us are God when we are born, we come into this world like Jesus did, wanting to love away the problems of the world, but at some point it will become too much for us. We will be spiritually crucified by a world of adults who refuse to believe that they deserve our love. Our sexuality develops within this context.

In my case, at about the age of 16, I developed an obsession with the idea that I might gouge out my own eyes. In looking back and wondering why, it occurs to me that when someone is ashamed of something, they won't look us in the eyes. If a sense was growing in me that my fellow students and my teachers were ashamed of themselves, and particularly ashamed of their sexual feelings, perhaps I started to think, on some level : "If you are so ashamed for me to see you, perhaps it would be easier for you if I were to tear out my own eyes."

This is similar to what can happen to adolescent girls and boys who become troubled by the fact that some adults are suddenly too ashamed to look at their bodies, and so they, too, become ashamed of their bodies and punish them with starvation or cutting.

If we are to manage sexuality in a way which does not leave such scars, we need to distinguish between innocent sexuality and armoured sexuality, that is the form of sexuality which grows out of the sense of shame with which our elders may contaminate us.

It is innocent to enjoy sensual pleasures. It is innocent to enjoy genital pleasures. It is innocent to want to be naked. It is innocent to want to see other people naked. It is innocent to be curious about other's sexual behaviour. It is innocent to feel sexually attracted to our own relatives. It is innocent to be sexually attracted to adolescents.

Armoured sexuality grows out of the fear of any of these feelings either in ourselves or in others. The passive extreme of armoured sexuality is frigidity or impotence, where sexual feelings are entirely deadened. The active extreme is aggressive sexuality driven by the need to attack innocence. This is what we term "lust" and is considered a sin because it is a form of selfishness not a form of love.

We cannot truly love others as long as our sexuality is armoured. Such armouring is antagonistic to openness, spontaneity and honesty. When we open up to love erotic feelings become stronger and repressed taboo desires rise to the surface. But there is no need to fear such feelings as they do not require being acted upon unless to do so seems appropriate to us.

Anorexia, Armouring and Objectification

Adolescence is a very emotionally difficult time for most people. Severe depression and suicide among teens is on the increase.

The reason why this time in our lives is so difficult and distressing is that it is the time we begin to feel the pressure to put on our masks and adopt the bullshit game of adulthood. Never again, we may feel, will we be able to truly be ourselves. This is a time when image comes to take precedence over experience. And, as R. D. Laing puts it, "To adapt to this world the child abdicates its ecstasy." ("Transcendental Experience in Relation to Religion and Psychosis" by R.D. Laing First published in: *The Psychedelic Review*, Vol.1 No. 3, 1964, pp.7-11.)

At the time of puberty, our capacity for sexual pleasure becomes very important to us. But during adolescence a change tends to occur, particularly for girls, in which the body's power to attract sexual attention from others comes to supersede in importance for the individual its capacity to experience sexual and other forms of pleasure.

For boys this can also be true, but what is often more important for males is the image of being "cool" or strong. In the game of adulthood there can only be winners and losers, and the maintenance of a viable self-image requires either the invulnerability of the winner or a cultivated air of indifference about whether or not one is perceived as a loser.

This is armouring, a rigid emotional construction which has the purpose of protecting us from threats both internal and external. The problem with this armouring is that it ends up becoming more of a threat to our wellbeing than any of the things against which it is intended to protect us. We need to convince the world that we are sexy or strong or cool so that we can feel good about ourselves, but we wouldn't feel so bad about ourselves if it weren't for the fact that we know that this front is a hollow lie.

What characterises childhood is spontaneity. We do and we experience, and think little about how it will be perceived by others. We are unselfconscious. We lose this when we reach adolescence and it has to do with more than the onset of acne.

One particular problem in which the devastation of this process can be seen in a very concrete physical way is in the condition known as anorexia nervosa. This is a form of obsessive compulsive disorder in which the sufferer is unable to accept their own body. (In other forms of OCD it is an inability to accept certain thoughts or emotions which lead to anxiety and obsessional thinking and behaviour.) While this condition sometimes affects adolescent boys and also some adults (particularly those in the entertainment industry) I'll concentrate here on the issues relating to the majority of sufferers who are teenage girls.

Following puberty a girl's body begins to develop in ways which indicate sexual maturity. She grows breasts, etc. This can lead to a dramatic change in the way some adults look at her. Some adult males will begin to feel uncomfortable about these changes and tend to avert their eyes from parts of her body. Unaware of the imperative for adults to repress their sexuality and, in particular, to fight against any possibility of being sexually drawn to someone under the age of consent, she may conclude that this avoidance is evidence that there is something wrong with her body, that it is in some way repellant.

Because we have a particular cultural obsession with weight loss and the concept that we have to be slim to be sexy, a natural conclusion for this girl to jump to is that if her body is repellant it must be repellant because it is too fat. So she starts to dramatically restrict her eating. Because she is relying on others to give her her idea of whether or not she is repellant and she assumes that to be repellant is to be fat, she will become fixated on the idea that she will know when she is no longer fat by whether or not men look at her body with pleasure. Of course this doesn't happen. The thinner she gets the more her body genuinely repels others. She is caught in a self-reinforcing downward spiral that all too often leads to death.

Starvation has a strange effect on the mind. It breaks down the ability to conform the inner world of the imagination to the evidence about the outside world collected by the senses.

Historically mystics have used fasting as a way to disconnect with the external world and get in touch with the perceptions of the deep unconscious. This can lead to visions (i.e. hallucinations) in which the individual cannot distinguish between something which is happening outside of themselves and something going on inside. Lack of nutrition is not the only thing which can have this effect. Certain kinds of extreme emotional distress can also lead to this phenomena in the form of what we call psychotic episodes. And drugs can have this effect also. But the point is that the anorexia sufferer comes to actually see herself as fat when she looks in the mirror because the commitment to that theory about how people respond to her body has taken precedence over the mind's need to accurately process visual information and the chemical changes brought on by starvation make it easier for the hallucination to occur.

Like other forms of mental illness the prevailing approach to treatment for anorexia is through attempts to control the symptoms rather than look deeply at what is really taking place. Very often when we try too hard to control something we only succeed in making it worse. If an individual is suffering from low self-esteem then forcing them to eat when they don't want to, while it may end up keeping them alive, can only have the effect of making them feel worse about themselves, as being forced to submit to another's will is always humiliating and disempowering.

The answer to any form of obsessive compulsive disorder is to learn to accept ourselves unconditionally. A powerful tool for learning to love our bodies is to return to their capacity to give us pleasure. Masturbation is a powerful therapy for lack of body acceptance. And, no doubt, gentle affectionate touching and gazing from loved ones can help an individual to feel that their body is not something disgusting.

Some blame the media for anorexia. Or perhaps a tendency in men to view women as sex objects. But these are superficial assessments. If the magazines weren't full of pictures of skinny sex symbols then insecure individuals would find something else to feel inferior about. And the sex object comes from within as much as without. The sex object self is armouring.

And here a distinction has to be made between sexual desire and objectification. If a man feels attracted to a woman because she has large breasts or a woman to a man because he has a muscular torso this is not objectification. Objectification is what happens when someone is valued for only one thing and everything else about them is considered irrelevant. It is quite possible to love a woman's big breasts while also admiring her intelligence, her courage and her skill at badminton. Sexual desires need not dictate how we relate to each other. As Betty Rollin said : "Scratch most feminists and underneath there is a woman who longs to be a sex object. The difference is that is not *all* she wants to be."

While men are sometimes sexually objectified, more often the objectification of men takes other forms. In wartime men have often been used as cannon fodder, valued only as weapons and not as full human beings. And some employers treat their workers, male and female, as nothing more than tools for the production of wealth, like so many robots. When we interact with someone only on the basis of what we can get out of them, that is objectification.

When it comes to the relationship between the sexes it is not erotic desire which is the problem, but armouring. If a woman wants acceptance and ego reinforcement from men so desperately that she betrays her true self and does things she despises, then this will have a corrosive effect on her emotional wellbeing. But if she only does what conforms to her view of what is right and what gives her pleasure, then this is healthy. Pleasure, if it is not gained in a way which brings physical damage, is healing. If we look at the example of the sex industry we can see individuals who go on a downward spiral and we can also see those who thrive in this world, the difference is whether they are following the beat of their own drummer or are driven by some form of desperation (poverty, addiction, insecurity) to degrade themselves by doing something they don't really want to do.

For men the problem is the need to maintain the front of strength or cool. This amounts to a kind of self-objectification, a reduction of one's self to the ability to conform to an image. It is this which leads to misogyny. For a heterosexual man to feel sexually attracted to very many women is a sign of health, but for a man to end up feeling that "a woman is just a life-support system for a

vagina" or "if they didn't have a vagina you'd throw rocks at them", is not healthy, and yet it is unfortunately prevalent enough. This kind of misogynistic attitude is a product of armouring. Sexual desire is the armoured man's Achilles Heel. It is the chink in that armour. For years he has had to stifle his vulnerable, spontaneous child self, and pretend that the armour is all that there is to him. But when he sees the soft flesh of a woman he is transported back to the erotic feelings of early adolescence before he donned the armour. His emotional self-discipline is under threat. Fear comes out as hatred. And often, even when he does have sex with the woman, he has armoured sex – perfunctory or even brutal sex – which denies a true erotic experience not only to his partner, but also to himself. Orgasmic sex is too much like that ecstasy from which he abdicated so long ago. He dare not give in to homesickness for that paradise, and so sex becomes an empty thing.

But, in truth, we can let the armour dissolve. We can return to that long lost paradise. This is not some kind of regression for the immature or cowardly. To rediscover our ability to love, to be playful, to be spontaneous and full of joy, doesn't mean we can't, at the same time, be responsible, brave and intelligent problem solvers, after all it is that armour which, paradoxically, makes us so vulnerable and which most impedes the effective operation of our intelligence.

Fifty Shades of Sexual Liberation

Making large claims based on a small knowledge base is my personal style. So why not analyse the significance of the fastest-selling fiction book in history without having read any of it? I've read plot and character descriptions, mostly from critical reviews, and it seems to me that to explore the mysterious grip a particular fictional work has on the public imagination requires only a basic knowledge of what kind of story it is. The details and the quality of the writing are irrelevant. These might be relevant to someone, such as a publisher, trying to make a decision about whether or not a book will be popular. But if a book already *is* popular, literary quality is irrelevant to understanding why. One would imagine that most of George Orwell's books were about equally well-written, but it was *Animal Farm* and *1984* which captured the public imagination because of their themes. This is equally true in the realm of pulp fiction. Nobody claims that *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades of Grey* are many hundreds of times better written than books which sell hundreds of times fewer copies. They are simply books which have thematically captured the public imagination. And it is quite likely that the very things for which critics attack them are a major factor in their popularity. What the sophisticate views as a crude and annoying caricature or cliché may come across to the fan as a bold archetype free from irrelevant nuance. And it stands to reason that our response to archetypal characters will depend on our relationship to that archetype in ourselves or in those around us. What attracts one will repel another. Our ability to identify with an archetypal character depends on our own psychological struggle. A man who is insecure in his masculinity may strongly identify with Rambo, while others might find his alpha male arrogance and aggression repellant. What is relevant to analysing the cultural importance of a work of the imagination is that fans respond positively to the character archetypes it presents. And it is that positive response which we have to understand. The imagination is inescapably prophetic. This has nothing to do with talent in writing, characterisation or plotting and it is something which is as true in the world of the pulp novel and the comic book as it is in the world of high class literature, in fact often more so as, in the literary world, a book's value is not judged by how many of us it speaks to. But once we understand the psychological evolution which is taking place in our society we can see it symbolised all around us in our popular culture. The prophets are no longer self-aware individuals crying in the wilderness, they are now pulp novelists and Hollywood scriptwriters probably totally unaware of the role they are playing in showing us the way ahead.

As I understand it *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels are about a dominant/submissive relationship between a man who is handsome, rich and powerful, but filled with self-loathing, and a timid virginal woman. To me this seems a very powerful metaphor for our neurosis as a species. This neurosis takes an active or passive form. In the active form we feel the compulsion to try to control others who represent to us that which we fear in ourselves. And we strive to accumulate material wealth as a way to compensate for the poverty within, the lack of self-acceptance, the self-loathing. Fearing ourselves we come to fear and need to control others. Feeling worthless we become obsessed with physical evidence of our worth. In the passive form our neurosis is expressed in submission and conformity. Not accepting ourselves we crave acceptance from others, even at the cost of our own degradation.

Because our neurosis originated in a division of labour along gender lines when men took up the task of protecting the tribe against predators while women remained in the nurturing role which had previously been shared by both men and women, men, historically, have tended to express their neurosis in an active form and women in a passive form. This is only a tendency. There have always been many actively neurotic women and passively neurotic men, but the patriarchal society, particularly, has encouraged men to take the active role and women the passive. The current collapse of patriarchy has to some degree decreased discrimination against actively neurotic women and passively neurotic men.

But the fan base for *Fifty Shades of Grey* is clearly among passively neurotic heterosexual women, therefore the issue with which it deals is the need for a reconciliation with the actively

neurotic man. And the method for healing is sex. It is through a sexual relationship that the man is liberated from his self-loathing and the woman from her repression.

To understand the dominant/submissive relationship we have to recognise that our society, having repressed its natural sexuality for over a million years, is deeply frightened by the erotic. The erotic is anarchic. It is subversive. And therefore those of us who seek control over ourselves or over others have much to fear from erotic desire. Our first step in taming ourselves as individuals and as a society was to repress our sexuality. Those who do not do this have historically been referred to as libertines – i.e. they have been viewed as dangerously free individuals. And one of the biggest threats to patriarchy is female sexuality. Male sexuality could be harnessed as a tool of oppression, but female sexuality can only liberate. And for the neurotic society that is something to be feared. Hence, in some cultures, little girls have their clitorises cut off. Patriarchal society is obsessed with the madonna/whore dichotomy – the idea that the "pure", virginal woman (i.e. a woman who has been especially successful in repressing her natural sexuality) is the source of all things good in society while the sexually uninhibited woman is seen as a source of social sickness. Of course the truth is mixed. Breaking the oppressive rules of patriarchy could unleash violent jealousies and promiscuity could spread disease, but the prostitutes who were so condemned by polite society brought much needed sexual healing to a deeply sick society.

The archetype of the libertine setting women free from their sexual repression has been around for a long time. In the British underground erotic classic *The Way of a Man with a Maid*, which was published in about 1908, the rake hero kidnaps a woman, forcibly strips her naked, chains her up in his basement and then tickles her with a feather until she submits to him sexually. She is horrified by this rape, but through it she discovers that sex is loads of fun and so she teams up with the hero and they kidnap another woman. And so it goes as our hero adds to his band of horny bisexual women. But this was a novel of its time. The hero is not portrayed as self-loathing, and the women spend no time agonising over the process of their liberation. There is no angst, just a fantasy about undermining the sexually buttoned-down Victorian society. And the book could not reach a wide audience, but was restricted to only the most decadent among the ruling class.

Sexual dominance and submission, which may be restricted to role play or may include the use of bondage and/or the infliction of pain, is sometimes the intermediary stage of liberation from sexual repression. It is still a form of repression of the erotic, but it creates a context in which the insecure individual may feel protected while expressing or exploring erotic feelings. Those who practise this lifestyle very often explain how it makes them feel safe. In BDSM the erotic is not allowed unrestricted expression. If the erotic is a wild animal, then in BDSM we pat it while it is safely in a cage. The active neurotic still plays a dominant role and the passive neurotic still plays a submissive role. In some cases the role may be the reverse of the one the individual enacts socially, but even here adherence to an agreed upon structure is what makes it feel safe.

So *Fifty Shades of Grey* represents an intermediary stage in our liberation from our neurosis. It is sexual liberation with the training wheels on. But what would complete liberation from sexual repression look like? I think an unleashing of female sexuality will heal the divide between the sexes. We will return to something approximating our origins as a species when men and women where nurturers and much that we associate with masculinity was unnecessary. The character armour of masculinity will be abandoned once we move beyond fear of the erotic. All that is needed is for us to feel safe. Where strength is necessary it will be the real strength which men and women have always been capable of when not divided against themselves by neurosis. The macho mentality is a hollow shield, it has never been true strength. And bisexuality is likely to gradually become the norm. Fear of same-sex eroticism is an element of the neurosis which divides us. Playfulness and sensuality not just centred in the genitals are liable to characterise the sexuality of the free state.

In recent times there has been an increasing fascination with transgender individuals. Who would have thought that we would see full-frontal transexual nudity in a major Hollywood movie? But we did in last years *The Hangover II*. I think that the reason for this fascination is because in the hermaphrodite we see a symbolic image of our future as a species. We see a single figure in which

the masculine and the feminine are united. And we are comforted. This is part of the nature of the healing vision which is emerging. The disowned become the treasured. In the New Testament – *Matthew* 21:24, NIV, 1984 – it says : **Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures : 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'?"** Now I'm not suggesting that Jesus was talking exclusively about chicks with dicks. But it is a part of the nature of our neurosis that we have most deeply repressed and despised what we most needed for our liberation. And thus it should be no surprise if those who were considered freaks or losers or outsiders become the front riders towards a new society.

The popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has struck us like lightning. Where did that come from? we ask ourselves. Why is this the fastest selling fiction book in history? Why are so many women suddenly coming out of the closet about their sexuality? Jesus said : **For as the lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.** *Matthew* 24:27, NIV, 1984. The breakdown of the repressive neurotic patriarchal society is also a breakthrough to Paradise and it comes, as was predicted, in a rush.

Sucked into Paradise

Grotesque and frightening things are released as soon as people begin to work with spontaneity. Even if a class works on improvisation every day for only a week or so, then they start producing very 'sick' scenes : they become cannibals pretending to eat each other, and so on. But when you give the student permission to explore this material he very soon uncovers layers of unsuspected gentleness and tenderness. It is no longer sexual feelings and violence that are deeply repressed in this culture now, whatever it may have been like in *fin-de-siecle* Vienna. We repress our benevolence and tenderness.

Keith Johnstone, *Impro, Improvisation and the Theatre* (Eyre Methuen, 1981)

Why would surrendering to the free operation of the imagination lead us through "sick" or disturbing ideas to a rediscovery of our capacity for love?

There is within us a natural pull towards wholeness and healing. What impedes this tendency is fear. We began as unconditionally loving beings. This was a state of faith in love. But at some stage we lost our faith. We gave in to fear and a divide opened up between ourself and others and our own psyche became split. This was the infliction of our defining wound. This is sometimes referred to as The Fisher King Wound after one of the characters from Arthurian legend.

When I was a young child I had an irrational fear which was the cause of much amusement among my family. I was afraid that, if the bath plug was pulled out while I was in the bath, the force of the circling water might suck me down the plughole.

If we cling to dogmatic ways of thinking or in any other way resist the uncensored and unimpeded operation of our own imagination or that of others it is because we can sense that we are being sucked towards the black hole of our defining wound. We fear immolation.

And yet the improvisers in Johnstone's example found unexpected tenderness beyond the cannibalistic fantasies. What lies on the other side of the black hole is our original unconditionally loving self, our inner child.

Why might cannibalism be a key concept surrounding the defining wound? To understand this we have to imagine ourselves in the position of a child who is unconditionally loving and has not yet become wounded and thus selfish. Selfishness is the natural self-directedness of the wounded. If we hit our thumb with a hammer, all we can think about is our sore thumb. And if we are wounded, much of our attention will be focused on our wounded self. But how does this look to the unselfish child. The world of adults, as we come to know it more intimately as we get older, must seem to us like a world of cannibals, in which the selfishness of each individual eats away at the life and needs of the others. The free operation of the imagination leads us back through the acknowledgement that we are spiritual cannibals to the point before we acquired the wound which made us such. The door to Paradise looks like the door to Hell, that is why we have been so reluctant to go there. But Johnstone shows how easy it is to negotiate this trip back down the black hole as long as we are in an environment in which we feel safe.

In Homer's *Odyssey* there is a very famous passage in which the sailors have to steer a course through a narrow body of water which lies between two terrible dangers – the Scylla and the Charybdis. The Scylla is a monster with four eyes and six long necks with frightful heads each equipped with three rows of sharp teeth. Charybdis was once the beautiful daughter of Poseidon and Gaia, but she has become a monster – a giant bladder with a huge mouth which swallows huge quantities of water three times a day and then belches them out again. Later Charybdis came to be viewed simply as a whirlpool.

This myth is a very succinct description of how we live our lives, caught between fear of the black hole or Charybdis within and the battle against external threats (the Scylla). Often the two threats mirror each other. The need to deny some aspect of ourselves, the acknowledgement of which might lead us down the black hole, can drive us to obsessively fight against the expression of

that very quality in others. An example might be a very conservative individual who is obsessed with the defence of freedom by military means but who also is in favour of censorship. Unable to acknowledge to ourselves that we fear the freedom which might lead us down the black hole, we project our internal struggle onto those who express opposition to freedoms we *do* believe in and fight against them. Our fear of the Charybdis drives us onto the fangs of the Scylla. And yet the way to end the injustices of the world is to lead the way down that black hole and show that it leads not to Hell but to Paradise.

This is not just a personal phenomena. Culturally we are in the midst of an improvisation similar to that described by Johnstone. Censorship of artistic expression was one form of cultural armouring we used to keep ourselves from being sucked down that black hole. Fifty years after the banning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was overturned in Great Britain and the United States, *50 Shades of Gray* has taken the world by storm. And in the cinema we have moved from a time when all films in countries like the United States, Great Britain and Australia had to meet a restrictive code in which the length of a kiss had to not exceed a certain length to a time in which films depicting extended scenes of graphic torture and dismemberment are considered acceptable entertainment at the local multiplex. Allow artistic freedom and at least some of the expressions will tend to circle down to the most primal of material, that which leads through the black hole to Paradise. And what are the obsessions of our time? Flesh-eating zombies. Vampires. Incest. Acknowledgement that our wound turns us into a living dead creature which sucks the life out of others. Zombies and vampires don't begin as zombies and vampires. They have to be bitten by someone who has already turned. They have to receive their wound. And, as Freud pointed out, the unavoidable rejection of our initial incestuous desires is one of the most common forms of psychic wound. Hence, in the world of erotica, pseudo-incest, and in some cases genuine incest, are all the rage. Allow freedom and we go back to our origins.

Fear is an important factor in how we view this collective improvisation. There are some who become very fearful and view it all as some dark Satanic conspiracy. Such individuals may claim that the Illuminati have conspired to create popular television characters who are homosexuals to brainwash us into accepting homosexuality, etc. It is easy enough to understand how a frightened individual can fall into this manner of thinking, because a society-wide improvisation is much like a conspiracy, but it is an unconscious one. It is an expression of what Carl Jung called "the collective unconscious" – a kind of group mind which exists beneath the level of consciousness, joining us all together. In an improvisation this group mind manifests itself externally. Feel a part of it and it seems magical, but feel isolated and frightened and it is the very stuff of paranoia.

It is important to remember that Johnstone's students didn't actually *become* cannibals and eat each other. They acted out scenes in which they were cannibals *pretending* to eat each other. Some are afraid that if we allow depictions of depravity and sadism in our books and movies then we are encouraging people to become depraved and sadistic. But going down the black hole requires only that we remove the impasse in our thinking and feeling which originates in fear of re-experiencing our defining wound. Our culture is a place to collectively renegotiate this passage and realising that we have nothing to fear will make this easier.

I know a good deal about this process because I've experienced what is now called bipolar disorder. It used to be described as manic depression. Bipolar disorder, in its more extreme manifestations, is a tendency to be repeatedly sucked down the black hole of one's defining wound and then spat out again. And, as with most forms of psychological disorder, fear is the key problem. In the manic phase one touches Heaven, one reunites with the inner child and the inhibitions of adult neurosis are abandoned. But there are two problems. One is that losing one's inhibitions and behaving like a child leads to trouble. Just because the neurotic adult state may be unhealthy in a way we may identify with cannibalistic zombies, doesn't mean that a grown man running around naked in a hospital emergency room where people have serious problems that need attending to is not just as, if not more, of an unhealthy manifestation within the social system. The other problem is fear. The descent into the child state is generally precipitated by a serious crisis – often some kind of double bind situation in which we are damned if we do something and equally damned if we do

not (see Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1972). What we are looking for is reassurance. Simply being dumped back into our childlike state does not provide that reassurance. It happens too quickly. And we have to remember that when we were a child we were particularly prone to fears. We might feel the need to check under our bed for monsters. And because the process of being sucked down the black hole is one of cycling through opposites – yin, yang, yin, yang, yin, yang – a prediction of that which is desired is likely to quickly be followed by a prediction of that which is to be feared. A classic example from my own major episode was when I was in the emergency room. I thought a bunch of sexy female nurses were going to drag me off into some shower room for an orgy. But that was immediately followed by a sense of terror that, when they were finished having sex with me, they would eat me alive, beginning by biting my fingers off one by one.

So highs can be scary and the disruption they cause to our lives can be extreme. For this reason there is a tendency to pull back from them to an extremely repressed state – that of depression. At some stage though, for our own healing, we have to return to the creative maelstrom of mania. What I've come to realise over time is that the key to managing this process is to replace fear with understanding and acceptance of the process. There are four things which can lead to problems for a person in a manic state – fear, reckless behaviour, taking thoughts too literally and talking too freely. Fear drives the excitement level and makes it hard to get enough sleep or to restrain one's reckless behaviour. The thoughts of the manic state are prophetic, but not to be taken literally. They have to be interpreted. The thought that we should be naked should not be seen as a rationale for shedding our clothes in public but rather as an inducement to shed our neurotic armouring. And it is not necessary to talk about our experiences if we think that those around us will interpret what we say as a reason to impose unwanted psychiatric care upon us.

I once read about a man who believed himself to have a fish in his jaw. (The case was reported in *New Society*.) This fish moved around, and caused him a lot of discomfort. When he tried to tell people about the fish, they thought him 'crazy', which led to violent arguments. After he'd been hospitalised several times – with no effect on the fish – it was suggested that perhaps he shouldn't tell anyone. After all it was the quarrels that were getting him put away, rather than the delusion. Once he'd agreed to keep his problem secret, he was able to lead a normal life. His sanity is like our sanity. We may not have a fish in our jaw, but we all have its equivalent.

Keith Johnstone, *Impro, Improvisation and the Theatre* (Eyre Methuen, 1981)

By understanding the process of going back to that childlike state, I now find that I don't suffer from depression any more and that I go to that state more often and find it a less volatile place to be. The process of improvisation is the best way to understand that place – one of openness in which we see that those who are closed off are closed off because they are fearful and long only for us to give them permission to be free. What keeps us from Paradise is the feeling that we don't really deserve to go there, and there is no more powerful way to have this false belief challenged than to have the door opened for us by someone who is already on the inside.

Inner Space – The Final Frontier

We respect the voyager, the explorer, the climber, the space man. It makes far more sense to me as a valid project—indeed, as a desperately urgently required project for our time—to explore the inner space and time of consciousness. Perhaps this is one of the few things that still make sense in our historical context. We are so out of touch with this realm that many people can now argue seriously that it does not exist. It is very small wonder that it is perilous indeed to explore such a lost realm.

R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (Penguin, 1967.)

To read these words you are making use of the most superficial part of your psyche – your rational mind. Our capacity for reason – for logical thought and enquiry – is like a thin crust which has formed over the sometimes volcanic contents of our subconscious.

The most basic aspect of human consciousness is sense perception. This we share with other animals. Each of the five senses appeared somewhere far back in the evolutionary process.

Our capacity for reason is the most recent part of our consciousness to have developed and, except in a very rudimentary form, it appears to be unique to our species.

Emotions are another element of our consciousness. Emotions are a part of the make-up of the higher animals but they take a more complex form in our species because of our neurosis. We can only make guesses about the emotions felt by animals based on their behaviour. But the historical internal conflict which has made our species vulnerable to doubts about self-worth has made us prone to repress our emotions in a way of which we see no evidence in animals.

Then there is intuition, our ability sometimes to grasp something in a flash of insight without the need to resort to the gathering of evidence and the application of logic.

Reason is a discipline. It is something we were not born with but which we had to learn to apply to ourselves and the world around us. Our capacity for reason, as a species, is now highly developed but this is something which grew over a long period of time and seemingly against the odds. Science, as we know it, is a very recent development historically.

One of the most important tools for the operation of reason was spoken language. While spoken language was crucial for passing on knowledge and for cooperating in the development of understanding by engaging in dialogue, on a more basic level it was necessary for abstraction. Without words there are only things, not ideas about things, and reason is not the realm of raw reality, but of ideas about reality.

Before we had a spoken language, the language of our mind was one of symbols. When we had no word for heat, or for fire, and we were lost in the snow we would have simply expressed our need for heat to ourselves by imagining a fire.

This applies also to our development as individuals. As an infant our internal language consisted of symbols – our mother's breast, the sunshine, the water in our bath... Memories of our sense perception of these sorts of things were the substance of our thinking.

The evolution of our consciousness, both as a species and as individuals, was not a case of one form of consciousness replacing another but of a new layer being laid on top of the old.

So we are able to look at a woman's breasts and :

1. Simply see them (sense perception).
2. Associate them with a sense of comfort (symbolic pre-verbal thinking).
3. See them as a symbol of love (symbolic conceptual thinking).
4. Recognise them as the mammary glands of the human female (rational conceptual thinking).

Our ability to thinking rationally and logically can be disturbed by our emotions. We talk of

being coldly rational for good reason. The state of insecurity which characterises our neurosis as a species, however, makes us potentially emotionally volatile and particularly prone to feelings of anger. This is why there is often a correlation between intellectual ability and emotional repression. The pursuit of rational knowledge can come at the price of alienation from our own emotions.

Similarly, strong emotions distract us from sense perception. We may not perceive the world around us with such sensitivity when we are angry or frightened or depressed for instance. And if we deal with our troubling emotions by repressing them, then we create a wall which also blocks out much of our sense perception.

The experience of catharsis, in which repressed emotions are allowed to safely come to the surface and the wall of repression is to some extent compromised, can be followed not just by a sense of great inner peace, but also by increased sense perception and greater capacity to think clearly and insightfully.

Sensitivity of sense perception can also be increased by short-circuiting the alienating tendencies of rational thought.

As I grew up, everything started getting grey and dull. I could still remember the amazing intensity of the world I'd lived in as a child, but I thought the dulling of perception was an inevitable consequence of age – just as the lens of the eye is bound gradually to dim. I didn't understand that clarity is in the mind.

I've since found tricks that can make the world blaze up again in about fifteen seconds, and the effects last for hours. For example, if I have a group of students who are feeling fairly safe and comfortable with each other, I get them to pace about the room shouting out the wrong name for everything that their eyes light on. Maybe there's time to shout out ten wrong names before I stop them. Then I ask whether other people look larger or smaller – almost everyone sees people as different sizes, mostly as smaller. 'Do the outlines look sharper or more blurred?' I ask, and everyone agrees that the outlines are many times sharper. 'What about the colours?' Everyone agrees there's far more colour, and that the colours are more intense. Often the size and shape of the room will seem to have changed, too. The students are amazed that such a strong transformation can be effected by such primitive means – and especially that the effects last so long. I tell them that they only have to think about the exercise for the effects to appear again.

Keith Johnstone, *Impro : Improvisation and the Theatre*, 1981.

Using the wrong names for things can be enough to fracture the wall of rational thought which separates us from the full intensity of sensory awareness. The famous zen koan about the sound of one hand clapping works the same way.

But rational enquiry and logical thought are central to achieving understanding of our world and of ourselves. It alienates us from our deeper self and our full capacity for sensory experience only because of the emotional turmoil and repression which our historic neurosis brought with it. Learning to counter doubts about our self-worth with unconditional self-acceptance and finding cathartic release for our stockpile of buried emotions can not just bring us back the full vibrancy of life we experienced as children but also fully liberate our intellect.

So where does intuition come in? Intuition – the ability to find understanding of something in a flash of insight – only seems mysterious to us because of our neurotic state. Intuition is the mind's capacity to perceive wholes and integrate information into such wholes. It seems likely that our proto-human ancestors lived in the awareness that everything exists as a part of a larger whole. Similarly, in our individual lives, one of the first things a child has to learn is the difference between "me" and "not me". Our ape-like ancestors had no rational understanding of how nature worked but there was no reason for them to see themselves as separate from it. The fracture that grew in human society when the male task of protecting the group from predators and the female task of nurturing

the young took the sexes down contradictory psychological paths, led to a neurotic condition characterised by dichotomies – divisions of the whole into opposing concepts. What had once been simply the whole, became split into male and female, good and evil, love and hate, reason and mysticism, and later, the right wing and the left wing in politics.

The more neurotic or internally split we became the harder it was for us to comprehend the operation of wholes. We had to be on one side or the other in the conflicts which raged in our society. To try to encompass the whole would have been to risk our sanity by taking the conflicts of the world within us. But still we have been capable of intuition, of flashes of insight which, like lightning, illuminated the darkened landscape buried beneath the storm clouds of our neurosis.

Unable to clearly perceive the nature of wholes, which seemed to condemn our insecure and divided selves, we set about examining our world mechanistically. Mechanism is an approach to enquiry which involves taking things apart, in reality or conceptually, to try to better understand their nature. It is a very useful approach, but it also has a major shortcoming. Reducing something to its constituent parts can tell us a lot about it but it cannot explain how it operates as a system, that is, as a whole. We tried to come to some understanding of how things worked as a whole, but in our divided state there was always a bias one way or the other which compromised our explanation. A physicist whose emotional make-up predisposed him to the idea of chaos might see entropy as the key factor in the universe while one who was more comfortable with the idea of order might emphasise the patterns to be found in apparently chaotic phenomena. Or a right wing biologist like Thomas Huxley might see nature as characterised by competition and aggression while his left wing counterpart Peter Kropotkin saw mutual aid between animals as being the more important phenomena. Any holistic theory would have to acknowledge and account for the apparent contradictions within the system, to show how the yin and the yang work together in a functioning whole. Science has progressed because it has been practised by a wide range of individuals who, like the rest of us, are all fucked up in different ways and can thus compensate to some extent for each other's blind spots.

The need for a holistic approach to scientific enquiry is often acknowledged. We are looking for a grand theory of everything. However a genuinely holistic approach is dependent on emotional integrity, something which is in short supply. Fortunately liberation from our neurosis is at our fingertips and with it we have the necessary foundations for a holistic revolution in science.

Our tool for exploring the inner space of our consciousness is imagination. Imagination works with symbols, the language of our pre-rational self. Symbols can reach parts of our deeper self which the reason cannot yet touch.

I'm somewhat uncomfortable about using terms like spirituality or the soul, because they can have bad associations. We might think of the soul as something which survives death or of the spiritual as something concerned with some astral realm or the supernatural. But the terms are also used in other contexts. We say that someone has spirit or we talk about the spirit of our times. We have soul music, that is a style of music designed to stir up deep feelings. What I mean by spirituality or soul is our capacity to feel a sense of wonder or the warmth of love, and also the imagination which has produced all of our great works of art. Nothing supernatural is to be implied in my use of these terms.

The imagination has a reality of its own. The same atheist who will express scorn for a religious person's "imaginary friend" will spend much of his time reading novels in the process of which he is emotionally engaging with the figments of someone else's imagination. What makes the imagination real is that it is expressing truths in the language of symbols.

This is what could be called poetic language. One of my favourite songs is John Hiatt's *It Will Come Through Your Hands* which was based on a dream his wife had. It contains a reference to "**an angel bending down to wrap you in her warmest coat**". Now Hiatt could have written "the female aspect of your deeper self offers you emotional comfort" but if he had expressed himself that way the song would not give me chills and make me weep. There is no such thing as angels in external reality, but this kind of image speaks directly to our deeper pre-rational self, to our inner child. Similarly, I cry when I read Oscar Wilde's fairy story *The Selfish Giant*. I don't believe in the

conventional Christian concept of a heaven we go to after we die, and yet the image of a small boy with wounds in his hands coming to take the giant to Paradise is one of the most moving I have encountered. The concept of being allowed into heaven is perhaps the deepest symbol we have in our culture for redemption, for the possibility of release from the guilt or ostracism or isolation which may result from our mistakes. Belief in the supernatural is not necessary in order to be effected by this symbol.

And here we have the danger of the imagination, and that is the possibility that we may mistake the symbol for an external literal reality. I've suffered for this mistake while in the grip of psychosis. The delusions of the psychotic episode are symbolic truths, but the psychotic individual is incapable of seeing them as anything other than factual reality. That is what we mean by the word delusion.

Everything which we find in our own mind is a part of us. But there are reasons why we might not want to believe this. Our neurosis is a divided state, and we may wish to deny those parts of ourselves which we have most deeply repressed. We may project these aspects of our own nature onto others. Our deepest self can be a source of comfort, though. There are angels as well as devils within us. Our reason for not wanting to own the buried comforting part of us – for believing that God and Jesus are "up in Heaven" or that our guardian angel has come from the astral plain – is that we doubt ourselves so much and are so frightened that we need to believe that something more mighty or magical than us can save us. The might and magic *are* us, but we don't want to know that. I remember once when my doctor told me that the dosage of anti-depressants I was on was not enough to be effective and that it was me and not the medication which was doing the work of pulling me out of the condition. "Please, say that isn't true," I pleaded. I needed to believe a pill could save me because I was certain I wasn't capable of saving myself.

If God is the creative principle of the universe of which we, like the rest of nature, are an expression, then for our early ancestors this nameless reality would have been the experiential given of their pre-language existence. They had no word for what they were, but what they were was God. But when neurosis set in we were no longer able to understand that we were still an expression of the creative principle even though our behaviour was becoming gradually more destructive. We were metaphorically speaking "cast out of Paradise". This was when we had to give a name to the creative principle and see it as something outside ourselves. At first we might have identified it with nature and worshipped it as a goddess. Later there would be many gods and goddesses representing different aspects of nature and of our own neurotic psychology. The more neurotic we became the more important it was for us to safely relegate our symbols for the divine to an ethereal plain far from the everyday realities of our existence. And the more fearful we became of this now terrible whole which seemed to condemn us for our divided state. Patriarchy brought with it the concept of a male God who sits in harsh judgement of our sins. Today atheism is on the rise. While this is partly a response to the irrational nature of religious dogma and the use of religion as a tool of oppression, it is also partly because we have become so incredibly insecure about our divided state that any acknowledgement that there is a unifying reality just gives us the shits.

There is no doubt, it seems to me, that there have been profound changes in the experience of man in the last thousand years. In some ways this is more evident than changes in the patterns of his behaviour. There is everything to suggest that man experienced God. Faith was never a matter of believing He existed, but of trusting in the Presence that was experienced and known to exist as a self-validating datum. It seems likely that far more people in our time neither experience the Presence of God, nor the Presence of His absence, but the absence of His Presence... The fountain has not played itself out, the Flame still shines, the River still flows, the Spring still bubbles forth, the Light has not faded. But between us and It, there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete. Deus absconditus. Or we have absconded.

R. D. Laing, *"Transcendental Experience in Relation to Religion and Psychosis"*

The reason why religious belief persists is because the religious symbols speak to our deeper selves. The mistake of many an atheist is to throw the baby out with the bathwater by denying the relevance of those symbols and his or her own need to come to terms with what lies beneath the superficial skin of rational thought. The error of the religious individual is to mistake the symbol for an external reality – to fail to understand that God and the Devil and the Holy Spirit and the living Jesus and all of the angels and demons are symbols for aspects of our own inner life. We can only have a strong emotional connection to anything, even something literally real such as a place or a person or an animal, because of a connection to something which exists within us.

The demystification of religion is the next great step in human progress and evolution.

If science is to achieve a grand theory of everything then that must include the whole of ourselves. We have made great breakthroughs in our understanding of the functioning of the brain, but the science of the mind has been virtually abandoned. Freud, Adler, Jung, Reich, Laing and the rest of the pioneers of psychoanalysis tried to bring the scientific method to the study of the mind. This is a tremendously difficult enterprise because scientific objectivity is virtually impossible when the tool we are using is also the subject of the enquiry. So results were often rough and heavily biased by the obsessions and blind spots of the enquirers. But this is why science progresses as a collective enterprise with new investigators compensating for the limitations of those who came before. This has not been the case with the science of the mind. In the days of Freud there was a brave charge into the dangerous wilderness of our inner world. Now we are in retreat. Many in the field of psychology and psychiatry have consigned the insights of Freud and his followers to the garbage bin of history. Today, for instance, mental illness is generally considered to be a hardware problem (a chemical imbalance in the brain or a defect in the genes) rather than a software problem (an unhelpful pattern of thinking about ourselves arising from the pathological nature of our social context). Outside the psychological and psychiatric mainstream, Freud, Jung, Reich, Laing, etc., continue to be widely read because, for all their flaws, their writings are rich in meaning for those of us who seek self-understanding. One can only conclude that their rejection by the mainstream is due less to a lack of intellectual rigidity in their work, something which can be corrected by winnowing the wheat from the chaff, than to what Laing termed "psychophobia", a fear of the depths of our own minds. As long as a species-wide neurosis persists, each generation tends to be less secure than the last, and the emotional repression so often required for concentrated reasoning means that intellectuals tend to be among the most insecure. In Freud's day we were still secure enough to peek below the surface, though his work was viciously attacked by the more insecure members of society, but by the 1960s, when Laing was at his peak, the psychiatrists themselves were in retreat. Laing was appreciated by his patients and by the counter-culture, but most of his colleagues perceived him as a dangerous madman.

The first thing we need to do to demystify religion is to untangle its two contradictory threads – the moralistic and the mystical. The symbols of religion speak to our deeper self, but our deeper self has different levels. At the core of our being, buried far beyond our conscious awareness though it may be, is our perceptual experience of oneness with nature and the universe. The mystical thread speaks to this layer. But that layer is buried beneath everything that we have repressed. The myth of Satan has persisted as a symbol which encompasses our relationship with repressed aggressive and selfish impulses and the sense that we could get what we want through dishonest means, Satan thus being referred to as "the father of lies". But religion is not just about symbols, but also often about rules, for instance large sections of the Old Testament are devoted to prescriptions on behaviour – what not to eat, what not to do on the Sabbath, how to treat one's slaves, which sexual practices to avoid, etc. Such rules are a response to our neurosis. They are a codification of the social conformity required by the most insecure members of the society who are the ones who most feel the need to control the behaviour of others. So demystifying religion has to begin by differentiating between the superficial and the profound. A passage in a religious text which says that we can eat sheep but not pigs is superficial and culture specific, whereas the statement that God is love goes to

the very heart of our deepest nature as a species.

Mysticism is the expression of truths in the form of riddles or parables. The reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand the nature of the universe is such that patterns are repeated. So a symbolic expression of a pattern can be applied to more than one factual phenomenon or situation. But the other reason to express truths in a veiled form is as a safety mechanism to avoid causing offence or disturbance to the insecure. We can only solve a riddle or interpret a parable if we are emotionally ready to accept what it communicates to us. And here lies the principle danger inherent in demystification. Religion is all about having a relationship at a distance with something which terrifies us. If facing the truth about ourselves were easy we would not have become alienated. But understanding why we have become what we have become and that it does not reflect badly upon us can, in time, make the disentangling of our deeper selves – using the tool of reason that exists on the surface of our consciousness to understand what lies beneath – something which can be safely achieved.

Some of this may itself seem like mysticism, but it can be understood more concretely by considering the stages of our own individual development. Once we were a physical part of our mother. This corresponds to the time in the history of our species when we saw no separation between our selves and the natural system which nurtured us. Then the umbilical chord was cut. We still had not learned what it meant to be a separate entity but our connection was more tenuous, based on being held and feeding from the breast. This corresponds to the time when the males in our species began to feel a separation from oneness with nature brought on by the need to fight against and understand predators. We would have still felt a sense of connectedness because our society was centred around the nurturing females. Our capacity for intelligence and imagination had been liberated by having a longer nurturing period than all other animals. We were liberated from the predator/prey dichotomy which must make it harder for other animals to experience the oneness of nature. As social vegetarians living in an environment rich in food and where predators were, presumably, not a constant problem, we would have carried the sense of oneness that we all have at birth, when it is literal, into adulthood. The next stage for us as individuals was to come to see our mother and father as individuals separate from ourselves. This corresponds to the early days of our neurosis as a species when tension occurred between the hunting males and the nurturing females and we began to become more individualistic to deal with the fact that the tribe, that subset of nature of which we were more directly a part, was no longer itself a completely integrated whole. The first response when we are separated from something of which we were once a part, is to try to form a bond with it, to hang on to it. And so we loved and bonded with the parents of whom we were no longer a part. But we experienced frustrations and we had the need to experiment with self-regulated behaviour. Sometimes this led to conflict with our parents and they disciplined us. Here we have a replay of what happened to us as a species when our neurosis really came into play. Men gradually took on the aggressiveness of the predators they were hunting, bringing that aggressiveness home to the tribe where the women were nurturing the children. This led to the women criticising the men, thus unavoidably exacerbating the conflict. When, as children, we became very rebellious or naughty, we had to learn to defer to adults. And this is what happened to our early ancestors as well, only there was no equivalent of the parent for them to defer to so they had to invent one, combining their sense of the oneness of nature with a memory of the nurturing parent of their own infancy. This was the mother goddess. Later, men would become so neurotic that they had to take control of society and the goddess was replaced by a god. Now God was The Father. To demystify religious dogma it is necessary to recognise where any particular belief or teaching is located in this evolutionary process. We have to allow for the level of neurosis and the cultural context. The more neurotic we become the more we need to put a distance between ourselves and the holy (literally, that which is whole). Thus the belief that gods and devils and ghosts have a literal existence in the external world. If we are insecure we have to believe that anything divine or demonic is not a part of us. And like me with my medication, we may need to believe in magic, to believe that Jesus was of virgin birth, walked on the water and rose from the grave. Only when we feel very secure in ourselves can we admit, as William Blake put it in *The*

Marriage of Heaven and Hell, that **"everything that lives is holy."**

The demystification of religion is not just a death but also a resurrection, a fulfilment of all of its promises. What was once just a fairy story becomes a living breathing reality. Jesus said : **"Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father."** John 16:25, NIV, 1984. The prophets of old experienced themselves as mouthpieces for the collective soul of the human race. The term "I" should thus not be seen as referring specifically to the individual doing the speaking. Jesus was telling his followers about the symbolic (i.e. figurative) nature of religion. The time was not yet right to speak plainly. Even speaking as profoundly and honestly as he did about the nature of the human neurosis in figurative terms was enough to get him crucified. What makes honesty now possible, in fact unavoidable, is the breakdown of society. In Jesus day the authorities would kill and torture those who threatened to reveal that the society over which they ruled was founded upon a disease. Today the symptoms of social and personal collapse are so evident that denial is no longer a viable option. But, as Laing pointed out, a breakdown can also be a breakthrough, and this is where we stand, on the doorstep of the greatest breakthrough in human history.

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